BEETHOVEN, FROM AN OTOLOGIST'S VIEWPOINT*

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Fate never perpetrated a more malignant irony than that which sealed the hearing of the greatest of all makers of music. Fate, to be sure, seems to delight in making the way of genius hard; or one might think that Nature, when at rare intervals she endows a being with that matchless gift of imagination which enables him to penetrate to some of her deepest secrets, grows jealous, or fearful of her own handiwork and seeks to cancel the endowment. We need only think of Homer and Milton, blind; Keats gasping out his life when it was yet at its dawn; Heine on his bed of pain. It was of such things the German poet thought who wrote the brief, bitter line:

Schwer ist das Leben—Life is hard.

Born in the year 1770 everything about the life of Ludwig van Beethoven must be told in superlatives. In genius he was supreme; in eccentricities extreme; in his suffering, a very Prometheus—and like Prometheus, though tortured, indomitable; though broken, heroic; though vanquished, triumphant. But also like Prometheus, Beethoven did not fail to rage against his affliction. Some writers have pictured him as uncomplaining, accepting his deafness without heaviness of heart and with a song on his lips. A Pollyanna-Beethoven—absurd! Far from giving any such example of sweetness and light, the immortal Ludwig raged and fretted and dashed continually against the intangible bars of his captivity to silence. How little imagination they show who think that the man who could compose the Seventh Symphony could bear with equanimity the thought that he could never hear it!

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Beethoven was a man of great faith, possessed of indomitable will and at heart deeply religious. He was ever greatly concerned about his health, and he adverts to it time after time in letters to his physicians and to his intimate friends.

Beethoven's heredity was not of the best. His father was at least "moderately alcoholic," and used the little Ludwig rather roughly when in his cups,—this chiefly took the form of standing over the prodigy in threatening fashion and compelling him to practice at the piano. His grandmother came from a low estate and imbibed freely. There was also a tendency to tuberculosis in his mother. Whether this background suffices to explain his constant invalidism it is impossible to state, but his chief difficulty seems to have been a chronic inflammation of the intestines,—he suffered for years from colitis. He regarded this condition as possibly surgical, and for this reason remained in Vienna in order that he might have the services of the well-known surgeon Vering, among others, but he seems not to have had any operation, although he speaks of the tapping of the abdomen for the removal of ascitic fluid during the last days of his life as an "operation four times repeated." No surgeon, either then or now, would signify an abdominal paracentesis as an "operation" unless he did it for whatever "moral" effect it might have on the patient's condition.

Some physicians have thought that chronic intestinal toxemia may have been the indirect cause of Beethoven's deafness. Certain it is that he lamented his illness in no uncertain terms. In his Will dated October 10, 1802, he said:

"I take my leave of Thee (Life)—very sad—dear hope—to be cured at least in a certain measure—like the leaves of autumn—it has faded—I am departing—even the high courage that upheld me often in the lovely days of summer—it has vanished—O Providence—let one day of pure joy be mine once more—Oh when, O God, shall I be able to feel it again in the temple of Nature and of men—Never?"

This hopelessness it may be said was nearer to the beginning than the end of his invalidism, for he lived fully twenty-five years thereafter.

He changed physicians almost as many times as he changed his abode,—there is a record of twenty-seven removals—and he became vexed with all of them, even Dr. Wegeler, who was, perhaps with von Breuning his most intimate friend. One of them he calls a *most perfect ass* because he advised cold sponge baths, when "the patient is sure that warm baths would be better." He complains of Dr. Vering because he used an embrocation upon his arms and blistered them so that piano playing was impossible.

The deafness seems to have become noticeable in 1799. The onset was slow, yet within one year subjective noises became very distressing, and by 1801, he had definitely given up elaborate plans he had made to "travel half way round the world," and decided to get what relief he could from Viennese physicians.

Writing to Dr. Wegeler, June 29, 1800, he says:

"My hearing has become weaker and weaker for the past three years—Frank (another physician?) wanted to restore my health by tonics, and my hearing by oil of almonds—my hearing remained impaired, my digestion in its former condition—my ears! they are ringing and singing night and day. I do think I spend a wretched life; for the last two years shunning all society, because I cannot bring myself to walk up to people and say, I am deaf. In any other profession this might pass; but in the one I have chosen, it is a wretched plight to be in.——To give you a notion of the extraordinary deafness, I must tell you that I am forced in a theatre to lean up close to the orchestra in order that I may understand the actor (singer?). I do not hear the high notes of instruments or singers at a certain distance; and it is astonishing that there are individuals who never notice it while conversing with me—I sometimes hear those who speak in a low voice; that is to say the sounds, but not the words."

He had enjoined secrecy upon everyone, and very few even among his faithful friends knew of the affliction until 1802. He had planned to be a conductor or a piano virtuoso, and had laid out very exalted schemes to enhance his name and fame; therefore, it is no wonder that the great blow fell heavily upon him. At this time he wrote the full details to Dr. Wegeler. His grief and anxiety could be no longer contained. There was always the horrible buzzing and whistling which otologists in these latter days always associate with nerve degeneration,—a condition that becomes

progressively worse and is beyond the reach of medical or surgical aid. He had frightful attacks of colitis and was "really miserable" during the entire winter of 1801. In dismay he wonders if there is any help for him in galvanism which is being talked about as a cure-all; for he has heard that a child in Berlin was restored from a condition of deaf-mutism through electricity,—this information from a physician(?) It is perhaps necessary to state that deaf-mutism is due either to a congenital absence of the auditory nerve, or some disease process which has destroyed both the auditory nerve cells and fibers. Nevertheless, in this supposedly enlightened age, the deaf and dumb are being "taken for a ride" in an airplane on the supposition that change of atmospheric pressure can make a difference in hearing capacity. But only the so-called "middle-ear catarrh" can even remotely be thus affected, and the relief, if any, must be only temporary. This in the presence of an auditory nerve somewhere near to normal.

Beethoven, apparently in a whimsical mood, told Charles Neate, English pianist, a "cock and bull" story to the effect that he, while rehearsing with a *primo tenore,* became so enraged by the singer's conduct that he threw himself upon the floor in a rage, and that when he arose he was surprised to find that he was deaf. All of this may have happened, except the deafness, because such a sudden attack could be brought about only through rupture of a blood vessel in the labyrinth,—so-called Ménière's disease, in which case the symptoms are so violent that the patient is very seriously ill. There is then great dizziness with sensations of whirling, so that the patient cannot stand, but must lie in bed, and nausea and vomiting are persistent and constant symptoms for from ten to fourteen days. None of these things are mentioned by the Maestro, and had they occurred, some note would have been taken of them by friends and companions during a fortnight of indisposition.

By the year 1810, the deafness was very thoroughly established and had long been noticed by the public. Writing to Wegeler in this year under date of May second, Beethoven says:

"I should be happy, perhaps the happiest of men, had not that demon taken possession of my ears. I have read somewhere that man should not part wilfully from this life whilst he could do one good deed; and but for this I should ere now have ceased to exist, and by my own hand too. Oh, life is so charming! but to me it is poisoned."

Not much has been said by his biographers concerning Beethoven's playing of the piano. It should not be overlooked that his musical career began with this instrument and may fairly be said to have ended with it. When he was about fifteen years of age he gave public performances which were well received, and his impecunious father had hopes of being able to live from the efforts of his talented son; but about this time, 1785, the son was appointed by the Elector, Max Franz, brother of Emperor Joseph II, organist to the electoral chapel, a post obtained for him by a patron of the arts, Count von Waldstein. He had received lessons on the organ from Van der Eder, court organist, and practised a great deal, becoming very fond of this instrument. He now received permission from the Elector, Franz, to visit Vienna, and he spent the winter of 1786-1787 in that great musical center. It was at this time that he made the acquaintance of Mozart who was then the leading light in "Harmony," and Beethoven was, of course, invited to play for Mozart. He was given a theme which he extemporized upon so gracefully that the older man was led to exclaim: "This youth will some day make a noise in the world."

Although his mentors intended that he should study with "Papa" Haydn, he seems not to have liked this master, and to his last days said that he had never gotten anything from Haydn; but Mozart became his great ideal, and he studied the works of the great harmonist until he knew them by heart. Unfortunately, however, Beethoven did not remain in Vienna very long on this first visit. He returned to Bonn where he worked with the piano, organ and violin under Pfeiffer who seems to have been a really great teacher, music director and oboist; and, although Beethoven has often been accused of ingratitude and there are sufficient grounds for this feeling, he never forgot Pfeiffer, and when circumstances permitted, he sent money to his old friend through M. Simrock of Bonn.

In 1792, Beethoven at 22, returned to Vienna and made it his home. Mozart had been dead for a year but his influence lived in the mind and heart of everyone, especially in Beethoven's. Vienna, the home of the Muses, appealed deeply to the young man's love of life and art, and he declared, "Here will I stay and not return to Bonn, even though the Elector should cut off my pension."

Beethoven was always associated with physicians either socially or intellectually or medically. One of his first sponsors in Vienna was the distinguished Dr. Van Swieten, physician in ordinary to Empress Maria Theresa, a man of great personal charm and culture who brought to his home every artist of any importance living in Vienna in that day. The Van Swieten home was a center for the playing of the compositions of Händel, Sebastian Bach, and the Italian masters, "performed with a full band." The doctor had an insatiable appetite for music and pressed Beethoven to perform for him after the others had gone, often far into the night, a half dozen or so fugues of Bach as a goodnight blessing! Through the Van Swietens, Beethoven met a number of important people, among them Prince Karl von Lichnowsky who became his industrious pupil, paying for his lessons a truly princely sum, and settling upon Beethoven six hundred florins a year which was to continue until the composer should receive a permanent appointment. The Princess, Christiane, by birth, Countess of Thun, seems also to have taken a fine fancy to Beethoven whom she ultimately succeeded in spoiling so completely that he turned upon his benefactor and precipitated one of the most disgraceful scenes recorded in musical annals. It so happened that a number of Prince Lichnowsky's friends were dining at the Palace, and after the good wine had stimulated fellowship to the point of intimacy, the Prince called upon Beethoven to entertain the guests by his playing. This the ingrate refused to do point blank, saying that "he was no cheap performer obliged to do his stunt for the sake of bed and board," and when the Prince urged him a little too forcibly, Beethoven picked up a chair and would have fractured the Prince's skull, had not some one intervened and

taken the chair away from the crazed artist. Of course Beethoven left the house for all time, but he was forgiven, nevertheless, by the Prince, although the old intimacy was never reestablished, as indeed it could not have been.

Many anecdotes are told concerning Beethoven's eccentricities. Early in life he bought a horse in order that he might ride for exercise, but he became so engrossed in his music that he forgot all about the horse and the poor animal starved to death. Then he took to walking, but his "walk" became a run over the ramparts of Vienna, during which he shouted, talked to himself, sang melodies and gesticulated wildly. One day his gestures so frightened a team of oxen (sic) that they ran away. He seems never to have been aware of the weather, but would go for one of his foot excursions in a pouring rain, and then came into the house shaking himself like a dog to the utter discomfiture of the inhabitants.

The artist, Höfel, was eager to paint a portrait of the master, and he agreed to a sitting, but after five minutes of this, he was seized with a sudden inspiration, rushed to the piano and improvised, completely oblivious of the circumstances. The portrait seems not to have been completed at any further sitting.

His friend and pupil, Ries, relates that returning with Beethoven from a walk one day, the latter rushed to the piano without removing hat or coat and played for an hour without stopping, but suddenly remembering the presence of Ries, said, "There won't be any lesson today," and went on with his improvisations.

When praised, Beethoven laughed boisterously and "ragged" his hearers by calling them idiots and making other uncomplimentary remarks.

In 1808, December 22nd, while conducting his Fifth Symphony for the first time, he stopped short, upbraided the orchestra for its stupidity, and in his excitement knocked over the candles which had been placed upon the

piano,—this, accidentally, one may surmise. Nevertheless, he would at times accept criticism from his inferiors.—— After his deafness had become complete, while he was rehearsing the Quartet in E Flat with four players, some one suggested leaving out the *mino vivace.* He watched for a few moments, agreed that this was good advice, and then crossed this part of the work from the score. But as a rule he was a law unto himself.——A lesser composer once told him that it was wrong to compose in violation of the principles of harmony and that no one could get away with it. "*You* can't, but *I* can," was his response.

Beethoven was certainly hard to live with. Servants would not remain with him because he despised them. "I am in despair," he says, "at being condemned by my deafness to spend the greater part of my life with this most abject class of person, and to be in some sense dependent on them." He fell out constantly even with his best friends, but many of them swallowed the insults and contumely which he heaped upon them. However, to his credit, he would often voluntarily write the most abject apologies in an effort to smooth out his uproarious conduct.

But to offset all of these grosser abnormalities there was a lovely spirit of devotion to his brother's child whom he took away from the mother after the father's death. In it we see all of the pathos of the master's life,—his celibacy, his unrequited love, his childlessness, his longing for companionship,—all of these gaps in his life which he was attempting to fill by an obtrusive affection for his nephew. But this merely succeeded in spoiling the boy, just as the Lichnowskys had spoiled Beethoven in his young manhood. This boy seems to have been headstrong, ungrateful and even resentful of his Uncle's attempted guidance; for he brought the hoary head down to the grave in sorrow because of his misdoings.

Beethoven at heart was deeply religious, although he never seems to have said much about it. He was a Catholic who neglected his church chiefly because he was not "denominational." He was essentially a Deist. On his

writing table he always kept two inscriptions said to have been taken from the temple of Isis: I. I am that which is. I am all that is, all that was, and all that shall be,—No mortal man hath my veil uplifted! II. He is One, self-existent, and to that One all things owe their existence.

Among his literary effects were found also two prayers. Whether he copied them from the writings of some other man or whether he wrote them himself, they are, indeed, beautiful:

"O God, Thou art the true, eternal, blessed, unchangeable light of all time and space. Thy wisdom apprehends thousands and still thousands of laws, and yet Thou ever actest of Thy free-will and to Thy honor. Thou wast before all. — To Thee is due praise and adoration."

And again:

"Spirit of spirits, who spreading Thyself through all space and who through endless time art raised high above all limits of upward struggling thought, from riot didst Thou command beautiful order to arise. Before the Heavens were, Thou wast, and before systems rolled above and below us. Before the earth swam in heavenly ether, Thou alone wast, until through Thy secret love that which was *not* sprang into being, and gratefully sang praises to Thee. What moved Thee to manifest Thy power and boundless goodness? Wisdom beyond measure! How was it first manifested? Oh! Direct my mind! Oh! raise it up from this grievous depth."

About 400 note-books were also among his effects, containing conversations written by others, and also some of his own thoughts. But, among his doctors was an Italian, Bertolini, who in 1831, contracted cholera and ordered all of the many letters he had received from Beethoven to be burned. Thus, possibly, we have lost some valuable data regarding the chronic invalidism as well as the opinions and reflections which the Master was wont to interlineate even in the most casual note to an acquaintance. Of the note-books given by Dr. von Breuning to Beethoven's biographer, Schindler,—137 are in the Berlin Library. In one of them, reverting to his deafness he summons courage to aid him in his need:

"I will blunt the sword of Fate; it shall not utterly destroy me."

In 1814, he played the piano part to his trio in B major, opus 97, which marked his farewell to the public in so far as that instrument was concerned. He was now quite deaf. Ten years later, in 1824, he was present at the Vienna Academy of Music when the Kyrie, Credo, Agnus Dei and Dona,—all from the Missa Solemnis, were played before a large and distinguished audience. He stood at the right of the conductor, Umlauf, paying attention to the beat, but he did not hear anything of the performance, and he noticed the vociferous applause only when a singer, Caroline Unger, caught his sleeve and swung him around toward the audience. Nevertheless, much of his work following the hundredth opus was composed during this clouded period, among others, the 7th and 8th symphonies; the song folio "To the Distant Sweetheart"; and the quartettes; a number of sonatas for piano; the Missa Solemnis and the ninth symphony. He had discussed with Malzel, inventor of the metronome, various hearing contrivances and experimented with some in the hope that it might be possible for him again to conduct an orchestra, but none of these things helped him, which goes to prove that his deafness was of the inner ear type.

Shortly after the incident recited above, Beethoven entered upon the period of his final illness. In 1824, he was besieged by the fear that he would die from apoplexy. Writing under date of August 1st to Dr. Bach: "I believe that sooner or later I cannot escape an apoplectic fit, such as my upright grandfather had and to whom I bear a likeness." There was probably high blood pressure, for he spat blood and had several nosebleeds. The following year he wrote to his nephew, for whom he was standing sponsor as already mentioned: "Death won't allow me a very long respite."

The autumn of 1826 marked the beginning of the end. Beethoven had been spending some time in Gneissendorf, a health resort in Austria, but desiring to return to Vienna once more, he started his journey on a frosty December day sitting on an ordinary milk cart which he described to Dr. Wawruch as "the most miserable vehicle of the devil." The

journey was broken by a night at a village inn where he slept in an unheated room under damp bedclothing. After midnight he developed a severe chill and chest pains. The next day he arrived in Vienna with a definite pneumonia, which subsided, however, by crisis on the 7th day, but a complication arose in the form of abdominal dropsy (ascites), the result of an unrecognized disease of the liver (interstitial hepatitis) which surely must have been present for months. Toward the end of December (the 20th), the distention became so great that it became necessary to introduce a needle through the abdominal wall (paracentesis) for the removal of fluid. A large quantity of serous exudate came away and there was much relief. This procedure had to be repeated, however, on January 8th, and again on February 2nd and 27th, 1827. After the second puncture Beethoven's unfailing sense of humor led him to remark to Professor Siebert: "You seem to me as if you were Moses who smote the rock."

At this time Beethoven seems to have thought himself to be in dire straits financially, although after his death several bank shares were found among his effects, as well as other salable articles. Is it not possible that in his state of forgetfulness which had always been a characteristic, a condition made worse by disease, he had quite forgotten about the "hidden treasure"? In any case he wrote on March 14th, two weeks before his death, to his friend Moscheles: "I have to fight with a hard lot; nevertheless, I subject myself to the dispositions of Fate, and I pray God that He may direct my fate so that ere my death ensues I shall not suffer from want." Moscheles then interceded with the London Philharmonic Society which had already purchased several of his works, and that organization sent him 100 pounds. It was not used, and after his death a question arose as to whether it should not be returned, but his executors declared against it and the money was kept as a part of his estate. With the gift a new hope came into Beethoven's mind, and the old creative instinct was once more aflame as shown by his letter of thanks eight days before he died; "I pledge myself to the Society, as a token

of my warmest gratitude, either to compose a new symphony, the scheme of which already lies on my desk, or a new overture, or something else, as desired by the Society, if the Almighty will soon give me health."

Beethoven died on March 25, 1827, only a little over 57 years of age. There is cause for speculation as to what may have caused his life-long ill health. Although his forbears had been somewhat alcoholic, he, himself is said to have been abstemious until a few weeks before death when his diet was chiefly eggs, which he washed down with quantities of wine! Perhaps his medical advisers seeing that he could not possibly recover allowed him to have anything he asked for. There is some authority for the supposition that he may have unwittingly contracted syphilis. This disease would account both for his chronic invalidism and his deafness. No one can be sure about this, but his deafness was certainly of the type seen in syphilis, although in fairness one should say that other toxic conditions give similar symptoms. It is not necessary that in acquiring this disease he should have transgressed moral laws. Venereal disease was prevalent in Europe in those days, in fact still is, and it would have been easy to have acquired the disorder in a perfectly innocent way. Not infrequently physicians and nurses become infected from patients, and it is reasonable to state that other persons may become likewise infected. It was nearly one hundred years later before we had anything like a definite diagnostic test, so that the number of "missed" cases must have been enormous. His cirrhosis of the liver may have been due to the toxins from his intestinal tract, if it were not due either to the racial poisons, alcohol or syphilis.

Unfortunately an autopsy was not performed until some 48 hours after death. In those days the technique of the mortuary was far from perfect, and histology was virtually unknown. Moreover, post-mortem changes made judgment of pre-existing disease virtually impossible. Dr. Johann Wagner reported that he found "the auditory nerves shrivelled and marrowless, the arteries running along them

stretched as if over a crow-quill, and knotty. The left auditory nerve, which was much thinner than the other, ran with three very narrow grayish streaks; the right, with a thicker white one out of the fourth cavity of the brain. The circumvolutions of the brain which was soft and watery (post-mortem change) appeared twice as deep as usual, and much more numerous."

As to the liver Wagner writes: "It was shrunken to half its ordinary size (chronic interstitial hepatitis), as solid as tanned leather and was greenish-blue. Its surface was covered with many irregularities (hop-nailed liver), and it contained numerous, hard nodules the size of a bean. All blood vessels in these nodules were constricted and thickened. The cartilage of the auricle was large and regular in form; the scaphoid (boatlike) depression and particularly its crevice, were abnormally wide and one and one-half times as deep as usual. The eminences and depressions protruded greatly."

In 1863, thirty-six years after Beethoven's death, an exhumation took place when a successful plaster cast was made by a Dr. Wittman, assistant at the Vienna Anatomic Institute. Anatomically, Beethoven's skull was not regular; particularly as to the "strongly developed frontal bone and upper part of the orbit, and the very large orbital cavities."

In old Vienna, on the Ringstrasse, one sees the Beethoven *Denkmal,* a beautiful sculpture representing the composer, seated, in a dressing gown, his hands folded across his left thigh, and his head turned slightly toward the right as if listening to the voices of Nature. At the right of the pedestal is a female figure, an angel holding aloft a wreath or baccalaureate emblem; at the left a male figure with the hands at the back, showing the strength of man fettered by invisible hands. At the foot of the pedestal and between the two above-mentioned figures are images of five children, —two on each side, the central one holding a harp. To my way of thinking this is the most beautiful monument in a city so crowded with the evidences of culture.

Out in the *Zentral Friedhof,* Beethoven's remains were interred, and the spot is marked by a highly-artistic, marble obelisk. Near by is the grave of Schubert who asked to be buried "close to Beethoven." In the vicinity is the so-called Mozart stone, but the burial place of Mozart, like that of Moses, is unknown. He was, according to rumor, put into an unmarked grave, the whereabouts of which were forgotten with the passing years. Thus Vienna, the city which they all loved, holds the mortal remains of these great masters of music,—Beethoven, Schubert and Mozart.

LIBRARY NOTES

New Volume in Historical Series

The Library Publication Fund Committee announces that No. 5 in the "History of Medicine Series issued under the Auspices of the Library of the New York Academy of Medicine" has appeared. The author, a Fellow of the Academy, is Dr. Robert H. Halsey, and his work, an illustrated brochure of 58 pages, is entitled *How the President, Thomas Jefferson, and Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, Established Vaccination as a Public Health Procedure.* Copies may be ordered for a dollar apiece from the Librarian on making out a cheque payable to the author.

Copies of other volumes of the Series may be obtained also. Last year *Andreae Vesalii Icones Anatomicae* was published. It is an atlas containing all the woodcut illustrations of the works of Vesal, consisting, in almost every case, of fresh impressions taken from the original woodblocks cut in 1543 and 1555. The price is $122.50. In 1930 was issued: Hieronymus Fracastorius, *De Contagione . . . Liber iii . . .* [*1546*]. This consists of the Latin text, with English translation and notes by Wilmer Cave Wright, price $3.00.